Joseph Kraft Post 8/17/75

CIA: The Assassination Hot Potato . . .

The Senate investigation into CIA assassinations is running into the sands of confusion. That is the immediate meaning of the subpoena issued the other day for new access to President Nixon's tapes and papers. The larger meaning is that even the most responsible authorities are unwilling to acknowledge that some issues are too delicate and complex for the rights and wrongs to be settled by mere investigation.

The starting point of the assassination muddle is President Ford. He made it known—in an offhand way that verges on irresponsibility—that the CIA had been involved in assassination plots against foreign leaders. When an outcry arose, as it was bound to, he assigned investigation of the matter to the Rockefeller Commission looking into domestic improprieties by the CIA. The implication was that the Rockefeller Commission would get to the bottom of the assassination business.

In fact the commission went an inch deep and then stopped for lack of time and staff. So Mr. Ford passed the issue to a select Senate committee headed by Frank Church (D-Idaho), which was looking into the appropriate organization of the intelligence community.

At that time, Mr. Ford said that he "did not want to be a Monday morning quarterback" on the actions of past Presidents. The only reasonable inference was that past Presidents were mixed up in the assassination business and that the Senate committee would make a definitive judgment on their role.

The committee did undertake a full-scale investigation, using a large and competent staff with access to the most privileged material. It examined the actions of all the post-war Presidents and all the well-known assassination attempts.

It even went into one episode that was not an assassination attempt. That was the shooting of the Chilean chief of staff, Gen. Rene Schneider, in 1970, as part of a bungled effort to stage a kidnapping that would provoke a military coup against the Allende regime.

In handling the investigation Sen. Church behaved with exemplary responsibility. He refused, miraculous to say, television hearings that would have been a socko sensation and made his name a household word. He worked closely with opposition senators, notably John Tower of Texas, to produce unanimous decisions.

His one impropriety was to say that the CIA had behaved as "a rogue elephant." No doubt that put the case too strongly. What the senator meant was that the committee inquiry, despite the comments of the President and Vice President, did not find there was clear presidential responsibility for all the actions taken by the CIA in the assassination area.

But even Sen. Church could not admit that the bureaucratic interplay between a President and a secret intelligence agency was inevitably a matter of willful, knowing ambiguity—a transaction where neither party wanted to know too much of the other's actions. Rather than merely say that, he is bowing out by demanding, through subpoena of the White House, documents from the Nixon presidency which are relevant to the Schneider killing.

The language of the subpoena strains for effect. It refers to gas masks and machine guns, presumably passed by the CIA to those who did the killing. It requests tapes from a time when tapes were probably not being made. It refers to a highly sensitive special file of Nixon papers that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger says he didn't even know existed.

The upshot of the subpoena is to throw the hot potato back to the White House. Now if any secrets remain unplumbed, if any loose ends remain untied, the White House can be blamed.

Turnabout is fair play, and President Ford is only getting now what he asked for when he handed the committee the assignment in the first place. But it is too bad somebody can't say flatly that ultimate responsibility for the assassinations probably can't be pinned down.

That way, all officials could get round to the serious business of writing new guidelines and establishing new machinery for command and control over the CIA. In the bargain there would be a little dent made in the populist myth that some kind of fix is always in, and that all the country's problems can be solved if only there is a tough investigation of the bad guys.

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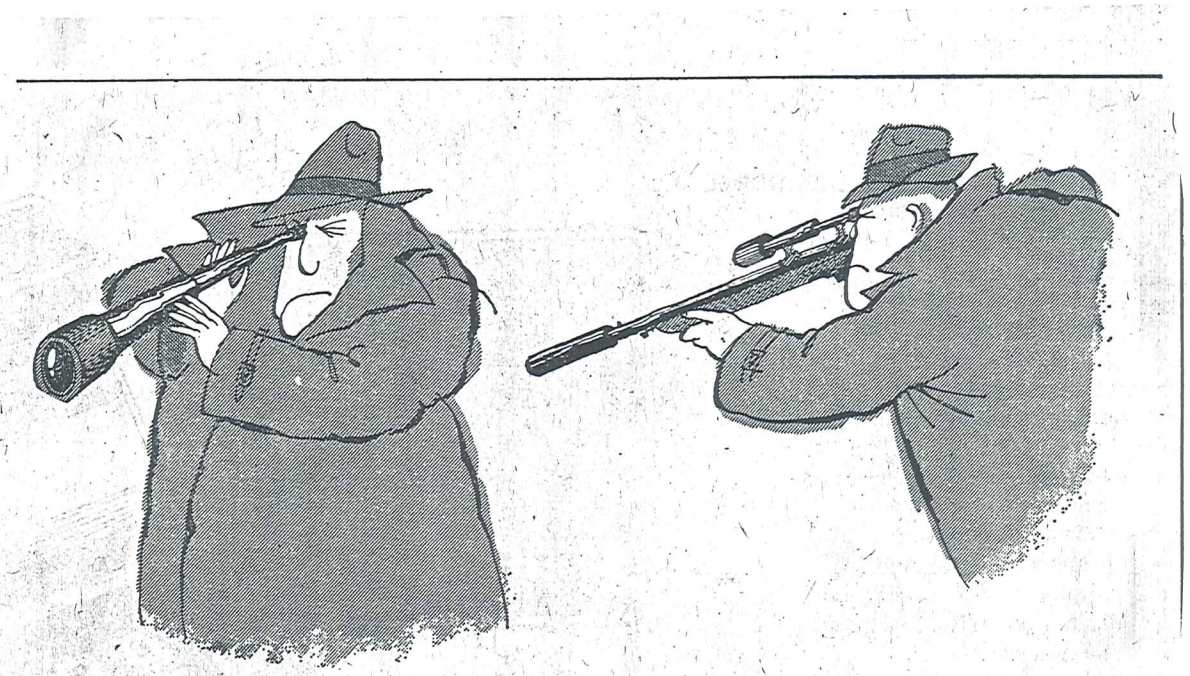

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The CIA at home . . . **. . . and abroad.**